

THE MYTHS OF HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

In 1982 a book appeared called 'The Myths of Human Evolution' and written by two biologists, Niles Eldridge and Ian Tattersall. In this work - which fits into the growing body of anti-Darwinist literature - the authors virtually demolish all the main tenets of evolutionism. According to them the standard story of slowly and gradually developing forms of life is a perfect myth related to the idea of general progress that is characteristic for the liberal optimism of the nineteenth century. One of the most important key-words of the classical evolution theory is 'natural selection'; in Darwin's theory it is the real motor of progressive change. It works by means of adaptation : species try to adapt themselves to changes in their environment. Those individuals that succeed best in this survive; the others perish. Thus the strongest and best organized specimens will form a somewhat higher genetical platform from which fresh development will start. Now, although Darwin's main work is called 'The Origin of Species', this scholar was not really interested in species. What was far more important to him is not how species live but how and why they are subject to changes and in what manner they react to them. When we define a species as an exclusive reproduction system that is holding it together (give it, so to speak, its identity), in Darwin's theory the reproduction system contains possibilities for change so that, in the course of time, a new (and higher) species may originate from the former one. It is for this reason that he was not really intrigued by species.

In the period between 1930 and 1950 a neo-Darwinist form of the old theory was elaborated, mainly based on the discovery of genetic mutation by my compatriot Hugo de Vries. Mutations are small changes in the genes that, under favourable circumstances, may lead to a slightly different form. Mutations replaced natural selection as the motor for evolution. The problem, however, is that mutations are rare and, therefore, in all probability a too weak motor for the evolutionary process. What is worse, most mutations in the genes are injurious, sometimes even lethal. For instance, the bleeding disease, or haemophilia, is caused by a mutation. The new theory is called the 'synthetic theory', because it is a combination of systematic classification, genetics, and palaeontology. Our two authors argue that it is reductionist. It reduces all evolutionary phenomena to statements on genetic mechanisms; it gives all kinds of evolutionary developments exactly the same cause. The mutation theory means that species simply are doomed to change; this is virtually denying them their identity or individuality.

The great problem with nature, however, is that it is extremely resistant to change. Specimina, individuals, and groups, including human beings, abhor change and are afraid of it. Sexual reproduction systems are hermetically sealed off against any other system; this makes it difficult to understand how a species can originate from another species. The biological record, from the earliest times onward, shows that the animated world is dominated by stability. Everywhere species prove to be static in the highest degree, remaining unaltered over extremely long stretches of time. One would expect that the logical conclusion of authors like Tattersall and Eldridge would be that there is no evolution. On the contrary! They start from the premise that, in itself, the notion of evolution is a correct one; in their opinion it is sufficiently verified and possesses a sound scientific foundation. One may well ask who these utterly reliable scientists are because, according to our worthy couple, everybody since Darwin has been proved wrong.

This reminds me of what Julian Huxley, the famous biologist and the first president of UNESCO, once said, that evolutionism is a creed rather than a scientific concept. Authors like those mentioned are obviously not yet ready to abandon this creed. They explain the evolutionary process by the occurrence of sudden changes that only last for a short time. A species, for instance, may be forced by circumstances to occupy a new environment (a new 'ecological niche', the biologists dub this). In doing so it may be destroyed but it can also be lucky and develop a different form of physiological organization. In this way the authors try to get round the problem of stability but in my opinion they are bringing in natural selection and adaptation again.

I myself was a believer in evolutionism till I had the opportunity, more than twenty years ago, for studying the matter in depth. I even read Darwin's 'The Origin of Species' from cover to cover, and wondered at the lack of scientific proof in this book. In the famous chapter on the fossil record Darwin admits that it shows wide gaps but he manages to use these lacunae as props for his argument. In my opinion it is highly unscientific to handle the 'argumentum e silentio' in this way. In fact, the whole evolution theory is brimful of such gaps. It never explained how organic matter originated from inorganic nor how organic forms of life, living beings that is, sprang from organic matter. It wholly overlooks the fact that homo sapiens is a very sudden appearance in the field of life since nobody can make it clear how he became endowed with reason, intellect, and free will. I must stress that my rejection of evolutionism has nothing to do with biblical fundamentalism, in this case with taking the biblical creation

stories as literal reports of how the universe came into being. Although being a biblical believer myself I would readily accept evolutionism if only it could be proved true in a scientific manner. That the evolution theory and the biblical creation stories are mutually exclusive statements is another of those outlived nineteenth-century myths that, let me stress this too, did endless harm not only to religion but also to science.

The attentive reader will by now have guessed what I am aiming at. When the duo Tattersall & Eldridge writes that "in its basic form, (evolutionism) is no different from other concepts of change popular in Victorian England" (and elsewhere, we may add), this suggests similarity between biological and historical concepts of change. Owen Chadwick once wrote that "the influence of Darwin ... through Taine ... touched upon the principles of history writing". I do not believe it necessary to select the French historian Taine as the special medium for the introduction of evolutionism into historiography. But on the whole Chadwick undoubtedly is right when stating that evolutionary concepts have penetrated into the very heart of historical scholarship. That Darwinism and neo-Darwinism deeply influenced our mode of historical thinking is a fact. At the same time, however, it is quite arguable that evolutionism and historiography both obeyed to a very deep lying trend in nineteenth-century thought and society.

One of our most beloved concepts is that of change. Former generations were mainly conservative in the proper sense of the word : they wanted to preserve, not to change things. A seemingly revolutionary event like the Reformation was essentially meant as a return to a purer form of Christianity that had existed (or was supposed to have existed) in the early period of the Church. The revolt of the Netherlands against Spain in the sixteenth century basically was a protest against more modern forms of government, like centralization and unification. The first great future directed revolution was the French Revolution. That the breach with the past was total then was indicated by the introduction of a new calendar and a new chronology. We did not keep these but another term, just as telling, remained in use : the Ancien Regime. This means that the political constructions of the eighteenth century had become 'historical', that is to say outdated, outmoded, outlived.

It was the French Revolution that imprinted on people's minds the general notion that change had now become the normal trend in society, and that, perhaps still more important, the changes were all for the best. A better, a higher organized society would result from them. Orthodox Marxism took over this tenet

of nineteenth-century thought; by a process of cataclysmic social and political changes even a new humanity would be effected. Everyone who did not wholeheartedly believe in this optimistic future directedness was dubbed, by liberals, socialist, and marxists alike, a 'conservative', a term that, more often than not, was used in a peiorative sense, as somebody who tries to stop the salutary process of constant improvement.

This makes me cite again (for I did this oftener) a quotation by the American historian Dwight D. Hoover : "Historians serve ... as secular theologians explaining the ways of society to man. In this role, historians are conservative and success oriented, showing how changes had to occur and how these changes were all for the best. Few historians document tragedy and failure; when they do, they consider only transitory failure which illuminates present success". I might add that, as a consequence, historians tend to become subservient to the powers that be, to the all-powerful state (the democratic historians not excluded). They also run the risk of becoming the hostages of the spirits they themselves released from the bottle, the prevalence of the time concept, for instance, or the idea of evolutionary development, which imperceptibly may lead to the tacit acceptance of determinism. In his 'Masse und Macht' Canetti stated that historians are professionally obsessed by power; they "try to explain everything with time behind which they conveniently can hide, or with necessity that, in their hands, may assume all kinds of forms".

In his book on 'The Anarchists' James Joll mentions the anarchist movement as one of those failures that fall on the historians' blind spot. They, he says, "have suffered as much as any minority from the historians' cult of success. (For) they never made a succesful revolution". Therefore, they belong on 'the dustheap of history', as Trotzky said of the Mensheviks in October 1917. A second example is the fate of the soldiers of World War I, in particular of those who served in the trenches. Millions of them became the victims of the folly and ambition of politicians and generals on both sides. Usually what they had to suffer is passed over in silence by official historiography. In the history textbooks for schools they nearly always figure only (if even so much is mentioned) as the total number of those fallen. The deep human significance of all this suffering is revealed not by any historian but by the war poems of a British officer, Wilfrid Owen, who fell in this war himself.

A third example could be the more than ten million dead of the great epidemic that swept Europe in 1918/1919, the influenza. One will not find them in the history books; nobody ever speaks of them. They are nameless and for-

gotten. But why? This plague caused more casualties than all the fronts of the First World War taken together! Could it be that, as Susan Sontag, in her brilliant essay 'Illness as a metaphor', suggests that we feel ashamed of the sudden re-occurrence of the plague? Twentieth-century Europe believed to have banished the epidemics once and for all and was not only astonished but still more profoundly disturbed to see the pestilence return. In their embarrassment Europeans thought the best thing to do was simply to ignore it.

Another idiosyncrasy that historians borrowed from the evolutionists is their infatuation with 'lines of development'. With the time chart, this seems to be an essential part of the props and mainstays of history teaching. Long ago, in 1936, M. Jeffreys advised 'the teaching of history by means of lines of development'. But he is by no means the only one to do so. Burston, in his 'Principles of History Teaching', did the same. Like the chronological division of history into neatly partitioned time units, lines of development are a means of bringing some order into the confused mass of historical facts. Persons and events are invited to arrange themselves along such lines each taking its appropriate place. Since they are lines of development, they are mounting. They suggest that there is infinite progress.

A Dutch author, Gerard Reve, once said that he could easily do without progress. "Life without it already is difficult enough", he sighed. This intimates, in a humorous way, that what we call 'progress' is not always as salutary as we believe. One may even ask oneself whether there really is progress. Must we who live in a century that witnessed the greatest and most terrible wars of all history, the century in which the most horrid crimes of all ages were committed, must we really have the pluck to speak of 'progress'? Is there progress in art, in literature? World literature started with two unsurpassable master pieces, the Iliad and the Odyssey. Did anybody ever write something so sublime as Sophocles' 'King Oedipus'? Only Shakespeare equalled him in his 'King Lear'. Can any architect build a monument more grandiose than, for instance, Lincoln cathedral, my favourite among cathedrals? For a long time we believed that, at least, there is technical progress. True enough, we have mastered numerous processes and learned to harness natural forces to our own ends, forces that were utterly unknown to our ancestors. But even in this field we are growing somewhat uneasy. One need not be a prophet of doom to see that our technological prowess is causing irreparable damage to the environment, perhaps even to the biosphere itself. Our greed and ambition, indeed, seem greater than ever, but is this progress?

What we also learned from the evolutionists is that lines of development have a definite beginning from where the gradual unfolding to ever greater perfection starts. Again I quote three instances. Greek democracy is seen as the starting-point of modern democracy. Teachers always point to it as the model of all democracies. Here again a few facts are conveniently forgotten. Athens was the only Greek town that possessed some semblance of democracy. All other poleis were either no democracies at all (like Sparta) or were constantly torn asunder by warring factions that did the most bloody and horrifying things to each other. In Athens herself the greater part of the population was excluded from the democratic process. Women did not vote and were no members of the Assembly. Perhaps two-thirds of the inhabitants were unfree, slaves that is. No more than a bare 10 or 15 % of the Athenians had the vote; many of them, burdened by their daily work, did not bother to attend the sessions of the Assembly.

A second example is the significance of the Enlightenment. I don't know how many practising students I heard explaining to their pupils that the Enlightenment philosophers taught people to think for themselves. Poor Plato and Aristotle! Poor Porphyry and Plotinus! Poor Saint Augustine! Poor Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus! Poor Spinoza and Descartes! What a pity for them that they lived before the age of the 'lumières'! I shall be merciful enough not to mention the disturbing fact that the great men of this movement, like Voltaire, were no more than very mediocre, second-rate philosophers themselves.

The third example points to a line of enormous length. One will know what dualism is, the doctrine (and practice) of irreconcilable opposites, in particular of good and evil. The Cathars and the Albigensians, the Manichaeans and the Gnostics were dualists, and many more sects. Now the general tendency, even among scholars, is to consider the old Persian dualism, that of Zoroaster, or Zarathustra, as the mother and origin of all dualisms in world history. This idea is so satisfying because it makes clear where movements like these stem from so that one can draw yet another line of development from this point. Here again historians are the victims of their passion for such lines. For the problem is that dualism is a world-wide, anthropological phenomenon that has no special or definite historical or topographical origin. Gnosticism, for instance, a dualistic movement if there ever was one, based as it is on the inimical opposition of a good world and a bad one, did not originate in Persia. What is still more remarkable is that the religious doctrine that, according to modern thought, is Zoroaster's creed of light and dark, of good and evil, of Ormuzd and

Ahriman, would indignantly be rejected by the great prophet himself. His starting-point is a monistic one, for he venerated only one god, Ahura Mazda, the uncreated creator of all and everything. It is only one stage lower down the chain of being that his dualism begins. For he also acknowledges two opposed spirits, Spenta Mainyu, the Holy Spirit, and Ahra (or Angra) Mainyu, the Evil One. He does, however, know nothing at all of Ormuzd and Ahriman. This doctrine of the eternally warring divinities Ormuzd and Ahriman, the good and the bad godhead, each ruling a world of his own, actually is a heresy, called 'Zervanism', of authentic Zoroastrianism. How the west came to accept this as vintage Zoroastrianism is a story too long to be told here. But what I mean to say is that, in this case, the line of development is fastened to the wrong anchor.

The famous historian Philippe Ariès once sighed that we would only learn to understand history if we would be willing not to see everything in social terms, that is in terms of oppressors and oppressed. I believe that it is equally necessary that we get wholly purified of our evolutionist lendings. We should sever our links with the mythological movement that is evolutionism, and try to see history in its own light and right. History teaching would be the better for it!

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